



CHANCELLOR'S NOTES

Chancellor Rhee's regular newsletter on learning, schools and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools

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Decisions, Decisions

Placing High Performing Principals in DCPS Schools



Principal Robert Gregory
Turner ES @ Green, Ward 8
Photo by Meaghan Gay

For the past year we have been scouring the country for the best school principals to lead schools in Washington, and throughout the spring and summer I have been busy interviewing candidates who have made the final cut.

There is so much to consider with every decision, and finding principals with proven track records for success is only one hurdle to overcome in our quest to ensure an excellent principal is in every school. This is one of the most important decisions we make for a school, and we never make it lightly.

What kind of leader does an urban school need?

Think for a minute about what it takes to be a successful school principal in an urban school district. In our most struggling schools, principals assume leadership of schools where less than half of children are on grade level in basic reading and math skills. Principals are charged with creating a bold vision for the school, and a strategy to completely reverse a trajectory of low performance. The job demands

tremendous persistence, courage, and leadership, especially when it takes some time before everyone else will see the same bold vision, or in some cases, believe it is even possible.

Most importantly, great principals inspire respect from children. Children know that even if they don't always like what the principal has to say, they know that he or she believes in them and will hold them to high expectations.

Successful principals often know their students by name, making every single student a priority. They are usually still at school in the evening, calling parents, working with teachers and following up with students they saw that morning. It is one of the most exhausting but rewarding jobs we can offer in a school system, and I have tremendous respect for anyone who can do it well.

Why is matching principals to schools tricky?

The right leader for an urban school can galvanize an entire school faculty, parents and the community to mitigate the obstacles of poverty and bring students in urban districts up to the academic level of their suburban peers. The wrong leader can do the opposite, making it harder for children to excel or keeping a harmful status quo in place.

Principal candidates who reach the final stages of the interviewing process in DCPS all have impressive backgrounds and a history of achieving positive results in their former positions. But this is not enough, and the last step is to determine which of the strong candidates can meet the unique needs of a school. In most cases we do this through a school community interview process and multiple discussions with my staff.

Finding this right match is not easy. For example, some of our schools will become [Science, Technology, Engineering and Math \(STEM\) schools](#) next year.

The right principal has the specific experience and expertise to successfully lead that transition with particular communities, each of which has a different personality.

A principal may have a leadership style that works with the dynamic of one community but may not work well with another.

Some principals need to be standouts in successfully engaging with parents in a different way, or working with staff and students through difficult decisions and changes.

Despite much deliberation and discussion with the community, there is no formula that leads to the right decision, and with the human factor at play, sometimes we have to adjust course when a principal is not a good fit.

Preparing principals new to DCPS

There is no silver bullet that creates this kind of success, but there are best principal practices that show us what to replicate. This summer we are running multiple orientations for new principals, supporting them to communicate their vision, collaborate with each other, and facilitate professional development and management of staff.

After an orientation, principals hit the ground running at their schools, getting to know staff, engaging with the community, sometimes even going door-to-door to meet parents and ensure they are ready for the first day of school.

This summer principals are also meeting their instructional superintendents, who supervise and support clusters of schools. Throughout the year they will assist new principals in navigating the school system and their school, supporting them with instruction, family and public engagement, operations, school culture, safety, community partnerships and more.

We are getting there...

We still have a few school leaders who are in the last stages of the interviewing process, and I am sure to have a few more nights of waking with school names and discussions with staff and parents running through my mind.

But knowing the powerful impact a principal has on a school community, I am very excited about the pool of candidates we've found in this year's search.

So I will welcome every one of those waking thoughts—that is, until every school community has a principal with a strong vision and promise for their school. Then, I need to get some sleep!

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